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1. Purpose of Guidance

To ensure that life story work is completed throughout the lives of our children to support them to understand both their experiences and decisions and to celebrate success, achievements and aspirations.

That all service areas have life story work at the centre of their work and ensure a consistent approach to allow all of our children to have a real sense of their experiences, identity and their network.

Life Story work is critical for our children who are achieving permanence through adoption a Special Guardianship Order or in long term foster care. Children who live with their birth families have many opportunities to know their past and to clarify past and present events. However, children separated from their birth families are often denied these opportunities; they may have changed families, social workers, schools, homes, and moved away from familiar neighbourhoods and communities. Children who lose track of their past and who are confused about the present, are likely to find it difficult to develop emotionally and socially.

This guidance sets out an attachment theory-informed approach to life story work:

"An attachment theory-informed approach to life story work would take as a starting point the child's need to have information that enables them to put together a coherent story, one that has meaning for the child, has a beginning, a middle, a here and now - and a sense of what the future might hold. Attachment theory would emphasise that what children need above all if they are able to reflect on themselves and present themselves to and communicate openly with others, is a coherent narrative that makes sense, and which leaves them with a view of themselves and their history that can be reflected on without being overwhelmed or having to defend against thinking about the past. If children have to work so hard to exclude the past from conscious thought, it can limit their capacity to engage with and experience the world differently in the present" (Schofield, G. and Beek, M. 2006)

Life story work should reflect the journey of the child from their early years, entry into care and through to permanence. Direct work should be completed with the child or young

person throughout this journey and should include direct work to help him or her understand how decisions were made and why, where he or she will be living, who will remain part of their life and what role they will play (cultural genogram). It is the responsibility of the social worker to plan this work and ensure the work is completed. This guidance should be read in conjunction with:

Leicestershire Children and Family Service Procedures Manual: Life Story Book Guidance

https://www.proceduresonline.com/llr/childcare/leicestershire/g_life_story_book.html?zoom_highlight=life+story+work

2. Our Commitment

We are committed to ensuring that children in our care have their life story, memories and keepsakes treated with respect, and that this information is collated and stored for them so that these can be accessed easily by each child – just as any parent keeps and safely stores photos, memories and keepsakes for their children. We are committed to ensuring that all children's early origins are fully valued – this includes their past experiences and first family identity.

We are committed to ensuring that the work completed with children is accurate, empowering and meaningful. We will make all efforts to engage with birth families to ensure they can contribute as much as they are able to.

We are committed to providing a high-quality therapeutic story which gives each child a carefully balanced narrative which explains the challenges faced and honours the struggles of parents.

3. Definition

When discussing this area of work a number of terms tend to be used interchangeably, although they describe quite different activities. The following 3 definitions are provided to provide for greater clarity to promote a respectful relationship between all who are contributing to the child's life story work

"Direct work" describes working face-to-face with a child using a variety of methods, according to the age, level of understanding and preference of the child. The focus can be on any subject. Methods include play, story books, workbooks, family trees, ecomaps, timelines, etc.

"Life journey work" means telling the story of a child's life history to enable the child to understand their past. In the majority of cases this will involve direct work with the child, since even very young children can be involved in an age-appropriate way.

The **"life story book"** is the means of recording information about the child's past in an accessible way for the child. It will include both photos and narrative. For the majority of children this will be the tangible outcome of life story work. For those children who cannot be engaged in direct work (mainly the under 2s) the book will be prepared on their behalf for the future.

4. Life Story Work Bottom Lines

Life Story Books

- Consideration for Life Story books to be written to the child. Guidance by Joy Rees identifies that with younger children it is better being in the third person.
'Use the child's first name and write in the third person, unless working with older children who are writing the story with you. For younger children, the less direct approach is a more effective and less threatening way of exploring their history. Toddlers use their names rather than 'I' or 'me' and only gradually develop a sense of self. Many adopted children function at a very young emotional age, and adopters are encouraged to 'think toddler'. Using the third person in the book mirrors this developmental process.'
- Display the information using the format present – past – present – future.
- Expectation that birth families will be contacted to share their memories and photos unless there is a valid reason why this cannot take place or birth family do not want to share information.
- Surnames to not be included for birth family members until age appropriate.
- Life Story books to be updated regularly (after a significant life event e.g. move / change in birth family) or whether it can be at a set time such as yearly.
- For children who will remain open to CSC, their work to start off with a very simple explanation as to why they cannot live with birth family. This will then need to be updated and expanded on as the child gets older.
- For children who will not remain open, write a simple page with why cannot live with birth family and include other pages which can be added in when the child is older by their carer.
- Display in a ring binder folder so pages can be added in and taken out with ease.
- Allow physical items to be given as part of life story work with birth family / foster carers
- Older children to be included into deciding how they would like their life story book displayed e.g. digitally and what they would like to be added.

To be included

- Family Tree
- Weight, time and other information about birth
- The reason the child's name was chosen
- Baby photos
- Photos of birth family & soft information known about them
- Photos of workers and their roles
- Photos of carers and memories of their time living with them
- Clear narrative about why decisions were made and what the worries were, include why placement moves were made

5. Life story book/work for older children

Some of our children become looked after at an older age and we need to consider for them the most appropriate way to share their experiences, family and decisions made for them. This may not be a life story book and may be a collection of words and pictures or a later life letter. How they want their information captured and shared needs to be discussed with them.

We recognise that a number of our older children do not have meaningful life story work available to them despite having been looked after for a number of years. Therefore, we

need to ensure that we discuss with them how they would want their Life Story to be captured and shared.

- Words and Pictures book

Words and pictures is a story board that creates an illustrated narrative for children, helping them understand events that have happened to them. A collection of words and pictures can offer an understanding of their journey in care and the decisions made.

https://leicestershiretotara.learningpool.com/pluginfile.php/76533/mod_resource/content/3/words.pdf

- Later Life Letter

The Later Life Letter is an expectation for children who have been adopted and provides information on the child's life from their birth up to the time of their placement for adoption. It explains the reasons and actions that led up to this decision being made, including why they could not live with their birth family.

For older children this may be the more appropriate option to share with Looked After Children their care history and decisions made for them. The letter should be able to give the child a personal sense of their own history and a sense of their value and worth. The letter should include, whenever possible, the views of the people involved in the process, including the birth family. The letter is a good opportunity for the social worker to include personal anecdotes and comments about the child, from their own experience or/and from the experiences of other important people in the child's life (such as the foster carer). This personal touch can help the child to understand that they are important and valued.

https://www.proceduresonline.com/llr/childcare/leicestershire/g_later_life_letr.html?zoom_highlight=later+life+letter

6. Continuing Life Story Work- for children with a care plan of long term foster care

Life story work is not a singular piece of direct work or a book. Life story work is on-going and should be embedded throughout our work with our children. Social Workers and Personal Advisors should ensure that life story work is part of their planning for visits and direct work, this should include:

- Understanding their network (completing cultural genogram with our children, involving other family/friends/network members where appropriate) in an age appropriate way and repeating this work over time.
- Completing or updating words and pictures work on their journey into care and permanence plan, working with parents (where appropriate) and carers to ensure that work is co-owned
- Identity work – who are they, their values, their interests, culture
- Life river/map

7. Role of Supervising Social Worker and Foster Carer

There is a clear role for Supervising Social Workers and Foster Carers in capturing memories, successes and celebrations for life story work, developing and adding to the initial explanation and story.

- Life Story work should be part of foster carer supervision
- Skills to Foster to focus on Life Story Work to ensure the importance is a thread throughout our children's care journey
- Foster Carers (In house and IFA) and residential to complete 6 month updates for the child which can then be used to update their life story work.

8. Role of Independent Reviewing Officer

The role of the IRO is central to ensuring that life story work is comprehensive, meaningful and not just a singular piece of work. The Review of Arrangement is a key opportunity to have oversight of direct work and life story work undertaken.

9. Capturing Life Story Work

The 16 + Memory Box is a collection of positive memories of a child which can be added to by the whole team around a child. This should include certificates, photo's and videos, memories and celebrations for our children.



16 Plus Memory Box
– Guide of process t

3 month updates should be completed for all children CIN/CP and LAC, this is the ideal opportunity to capture achievements, development and significant decisions for children which can then be used within life story work. Guidance for 3 month update can be found on local policies, procedures and guidance.

Statutory Visit Template – Life Story information to be captured. All statutory visits are recorded within steps within the new mosaic system. Pictures and direct work to be uploaded to mosaic and to Portal 'Memory Box'

http://llrchildcare.proceduresonline.com/leicestershire/local_resources.html

Contact summary: To include additional box for life story information. Pictures and direct work to be uploaded to mosaic and to Portal 'Memory Box'

Lifestory step - when a child or young person is accommodated, a next action from a child in care plan is for Life Story Work. This creates a step where the worker must enter the start date for lifestory work, the end date, and commentary box to add comments about they type of work being undertaking and progress. This step should be started once lifestory work is commenced, and be saved and remain un-finished during involvement. Once a life story book is completed, the end date can be entered and the step finished.

10. Transfer Expectations – for children with care plan of long term fostering

Children subject to Full Care Order and placed in mainstream, Kinship placement or residential – Initial Life Story book to be completed by originating team prior to transfer to Children in Care Service – Bottom lines to be applied. The life story book should be in addition to the words and pictures that have been developed with the family and cultural genograms

Children subject to S.20 – words and pictures book detailing their experiences up to the point of decision of long-term foster care as care plan or another age appropriate piece of direct work completed with the young person. This is likely to be older children however, caveat applied that if child subject to S.20 under 11 years old and care plan long term foster care then Initial Life Story Book to be completed.

Children transferring to the Care Leavers Team need to have updated life story work, this should have been completed throughout being a looked after child with clear evidence of the life story work having been completed with the child/young person, not as a piece of work to be completed at point of transfer.

Older children who do not have a life story book or work that has been completed prior to this guidance being implemented. To be asked how they would like information shared with them. eg. words and pictures or later life letter and this to be completed as part of transfer.

Life Story Work is critical for our children to understand their experiences and to give them a personal sense of their own history and a sense of their value and worth.

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Children in Care, Fostering, Adoption and the virtual school

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